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## Places of Memory and Meaning: The Eastern Sierra and Mojave Desert

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### Cover Page Footnote

Glenn Pascall has had a wide-ranging career in Washington, D.C., California and the Pacific Northwest as a public official, scholar, economic consultant and journalist. He is author most recently of *Southern California Mountain Country: Places John Muir Walked and Places He Would Have Loved to Know* (2015), which received the National Sierra Club 2016 Special Achievement Award.

## Places of Memory and Meaning: The Eastern Sierra and Mojave Desert

Glenn Pascall<sup>1</sup>

Growing up in Ventura in the 1950s, the highlight of each year came for me on the morning in August when we would rise at 4 a.m. to drive over the Grapevine into the Great Valley, then over Tehachapi to Mojave where we enjoyed a pancake breakfast. Emerging from the restaurant into blinding desert sunlight, we were hit by an intensity of heat unknown on the coast. It would be our companion in hours to come, delighting us at times with mirages rising from the pavement – an effect heightened on one stretch of Highway 14 by roller-coaster up and down that my dad relished driving. (Photo: 61; all photos @Glenn Pascall)

Beyond the 14, we headed up US 395, to Little Lake and Olancha, and the first thrilling glimpse of the High Sierra south of Lone Pine where we'd detour into the Alabama Hills for a closer look at that mysterious point that was the highest in the United States. From the east, Mt. Whitney is a handsome pyramid flanked by spires. I began to dream of standing on its summit.

Back on 395 our journey continued up the Owens Valley, a place that seemed wide if you looked straight ahead and narrow if you looked at the mighty Sierra and the Inyo-White range towering on either side of the highway. The few small towns we came to – Lone, Pine, Independence, Big Pine, Bishop – felt like outposts of civilization in this vast land. North of Bishop, the excitement of climbing Sherwin Grade brought us to the first roadside pine trees. Not so far beyond came the Mammoth turnoff to our destination – Woods Lodge on the hillside above Lake George. Carrying two weeks' of vacation supplies from the car up the cabin steps, we quickly felt the 9,200-foot elevation. (Photo: 56)

Over the years my dad and I climbed Crystal Crag above Lake George and walked the Mammoth Crest where we found beautifully sculpted Whitebark Pine remnants. When I was sixteen we made the Mount Whitney climb. In the days before anyone had thought of wilderness permits, we camped overnight at Consultation Lake and next day reached the summit, where I first encountered a realm above timberline that held snow into the summer.

At an early age I became hooked on the Mojave Desert as prelude and the Eastern Sierra as destination. My dad was a geologist and when there was no more oil to be discovered in the Southland he became a mining expert and chief mineral appraiser for the State of California. On our outings I fell in love with the elegant architecture of mine ruins in the

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Mojave, including a bullet-riddled iron shed that dad looked at and said, “In the desert any piece of metal is sure to be used for target practice, from a tin can on up.” (Photo: 97)

Over the years, we admired mining gear at the Laws Museum near Bishop, at Bodie above Bridgeport, and at Randsburg, Johannesburg and Red Mountain in the Mojave. Bodie is a well-preserved ghost town that once was home to 10,000 people, while the Mojave trio are dying towns slowly being emptied as the mines have played out – haunting reminders of human dreams unforeseen destinies.

Yet these seemingly desolate places are filled with aesthetically evocative objects. On a drive back to Southern California from Bishop, I stopped late afternoon on a winter day at Spinelli mine in Red Mountain. The wreckage of a huge mill was surrounded by heaps of crumpled metal. The skeleton of a long-disused head frame stood starkly against the elegiac sky. A large piece of rusted iron, hanging from the wall of the mill by a single bolt, banged softly in irregular gusts of wind that gave this abandoned industrial site the feel of a haunted house.

Closer inspection of the detritus revealed minor miracles. Sheets of iron had been hammered by random chance into sculptural forms worthy of display in a museum. Remains of metal gizmos, half-rusted through, were transformed into objects of art. The elegance of their decay is a confirmation that discovering the desert requires receptivity to the recessive aspect that records traces of time. (Photo: 115)

In 1960 I entered Pomona College and quickly connected with friends who loved the mountains. We discovered the nearby San Gabriels and our more ambitious journeys took us to the Eastern Sierra. With the exuberance of youth we thought nothing of snow camping at 11,000 feet in February east of Cirque Peak, or assaulting the walls of Temple Crag above Big Pine Creek amidst the swirling mists of May, or doing a trail-less one-day assault of Mt. Langley from a road head at 6,800 to the summit at 14,042 feet. (Photo: 26)

My first job out of college was in Sacramento and it proved a gateway to the “other” Sierra – the Northern part of the range where east and west slopes are less starkly contrasted and the topography is more forgiving. The glory of that region is its forests, including a stand of Juniper on Carson Pass that John Muir said was the Sierra’s finest. The area is also studded with pioneer ruins unrelated to mining, built by those whose hope was to make a home in the high country. (Photo: 34)

At age 73, my dad and mom moved from Sacramento to Bishop, where dad spent the last seventeen years of his life. The choice was deliberate. This is a place where he could admire the grand geology and geography of the Eastern Sierra and White Mountains. A favorite outing of his was south from Bishop to Big Pine and thence over Westgaard Pass to Schulman and Patriarch groves where we wondered at the Bristlecone Pine, world’s oldest trees. On the way up White Mountain Road we pulled over at Sierra View for a stunning panorama whose centerpiece is the many-glaciered Palisade Group, almost hidden from Owens Valley. (Photo: 27)

My dad was an active supporter of the White Mountain Research Station, led Eastern Sierra field trips for Geological Society chapters from Southern California, and was a personal friend of the great climber and photographer Galen Rowell of Mountain Light. Dad also backpacked into McGee Creek until age eighty. When he died ten years later, I journeyed to Bishop to clear out and close the family home. The work was done on a late afternoon in December and I paused to say “Goodbye, Dad.” A sudden cold wind came up and I became aware that the cottonwood tree, which had stood by the backyard creek for all his seventeen years here, had toppled. It was as if his strong spirit was bidding farewell to earth.

A month later I headed up Bishop Creek with cousin Gary and stepdaughter Karen, to scope out sites for depositing my dad’s ashes. At 7,500 feet we found clear waters running between grassy banks below a spectacular granite cliff. Agreement was immediate: this is the place. Later that day we returned in the company of Dad’s closest friends from Bishop, John Burnstrom and Gene and LeeAnn Rasmussen. Gene and John had performed countless practical tasks that made it possible for Dad to stay in the family home during the last years of his life.

So the ceremony was done, Karen taking the lead, first scattering a few ashes where dad had deposited his wife’s remains in lower Bishop Creek and then distributing the rest in this classic bit of Eastern Sierra terrain, his favorite locale. We were invited to dinner by the Rasmussens, multi-generational Bishop residents whose gracious home is filled with canvasses of the great mountains painted by LeeAnn’s father. The Rasmussens’ “back yard” is a wide field lined on the far side with cottonwood. On the skyline, snowy White Mountain Peak – third highest point in California and the tallest “fourteener” outside the Sierra – glowed pink in the evening light.

Born in El Paso and raised in southeast Los Angeles, my father was a long-time member of the Sierra Club and left a large portion of his estate to The Nature Conservancy. He became estranged from urban Southern California for the “abstraction of its water” (the phrase of a British writer) from Owens Valley to the L.A. Aqueduct.

My dad was a genuine environmentalist, yet he abhorred proposals to designate vast tracts of land in compliance with the 1964 Wilderness Act, which required removal of all evidence of human activity no matter how historic. He viewed as especially wrong-minded and even tragic the mandated destruction of remnants and memories kept alive as a complete experience for travelers by such folks as the founding family of Cerro Gordo Mine, a remote location east of Owens Valley in the Inyo Mountains. (Photo: 92)

Then there is Manzanar. My dad fought in the Pacific War and respected the Japanese as adversaries, but he had no personal feeling toward them. His attitude was far different toward Japanese-Americans interned during the war. Toward them he felt unbounded sympathy and believed a great wrong had been done to them.

Heading to Bishop for Christmas 2002, I entered the Owens Valley late afternoon as the sun lowered westward over the Sierra crest. A storm had cut off the summits of the Whitney group from view, but ahead the clouds were breaking up. I pulled off the highway to compose a picture as the sun spread a final fan of light before it dropped behind the mountains. Suddenly came the realization that I was at Manzanar, best known of the camps where Japanese-Americans were relocated during World War II.

The weather was raw and windy on this dying winter day. I pulled farther off the highway and drove over broken asphalt past double guardhouses into the camp. It was an instantly impactful moment. I could sense how it might have felt being inducted as an internee, with life as it had been closing behind one, the outer world walled off by military police. A few buildings were scattered in the spare landscape amidst gathering dusk. This brief encounter brought a new perspective that seared my previous absence of awareness of what it must have been like to lose the life one had known. (Photo: 46)

The physical setting of Manzanar is a paradox. The immediate site is bleak and forbidding, often windswept and at times dust-choked – aspects that weighed on those interned as elemental and even obliterating, with the two-mile high wall of the Sierra Nevada a visible symbol of separation between those interned and the Pacific Coast. Yet this is also a magnificent location. One of Ansel Adams' most famous images was recorded here in 1944. In his photograph, Mt. Williamson rises broadly beyond a huge boulder pile.

At 14,375 feet, Williamson is California's second highest peak and the Sierra's most massive summit. Rising in solitary and self-standing bulk east of the crest, it can be seen from Owens Valley not only in profile but "round the mountain." On this winter day, Williamson was in full glory. North of Independence a few miles beyond Manzanar, I pulled over to record a brief, indelible moment. Like the Whitney group, Williamson had been shrouded in storm. But now the summit had emerged, wreathed by cloud streamers brilliantly lighted on top and dark below. Ten minutes earlier the peak was hidden. Ten minutes later it would be dusk-shrouded and cloudless. This was the moment of transformative magic. (Photo: 152)

The mountains, the mines, the mediating spaces derive their meaning from what they evoke for us in the encounter. What do I take from the good fortune of knowing these places? What do I derive as the lasting essence of my own experience? Perhaps the answer is found neither in exaltation nor sadness but haunting settings expressive of moods from "The Range of Light" to the loneliness of dusk. Yet in the end they come together as memories of being a privileged witness to the ever-changing sky and a magnificent line of peaks upon the horizon – the mighty Sierra and the no less remarkable White Mountains, mysteriously fading into the random geography of the desert.

Such a juxtaposition is found in few places on earth. This realm encompasses elegiac remains and reminders of human dreams, placed in landscapes that transcend the human.

We are the lucky ones who, once introduced to this place, have been given the chance to make it an inseparable part of our personal biography. (Photo:123)



**MONOLITH, LOST HORSE VALLEY**

Joshua Tree National Park, California





**BARE ASPEN & FROZEN MEADOW**

**From Mather Point**

Great Basin National Park, Nevada



**HEADFRAME, EVENING STAR MINE**

**Mojave National Preserve**

San Bernardino County, California



**IRON LATCH, STABLE DOOR**

**Bodie State Park**

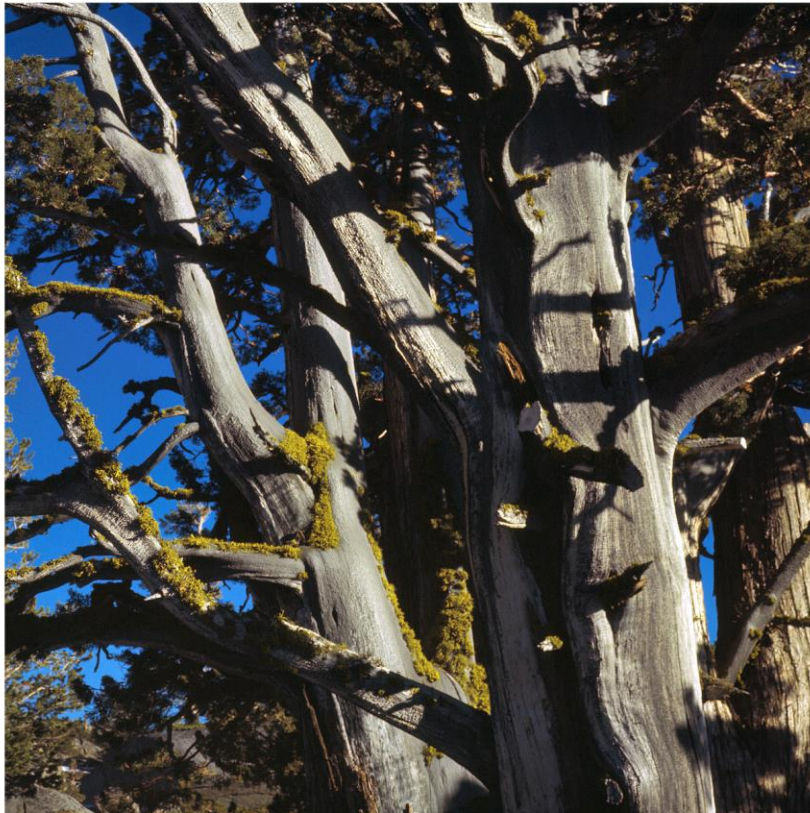
Mono County, California





**TEMPLE CRAG FROM ABOVE BIG PINE CREEK**

Eastern Sierra Nevada, California



**JUNIPER AT CARSON PASS**

Northern Sierra Nevada, California



**BRISTLECONE PINE**

**Patriarch Grove**

White Mountains, California





**MINE TRAMWAY GEARWHEELS**

Laws, Inyo County, California



**GRANITE BOULDER ON ICE PILLAR**

**Palisade Glacier**

Eastern Sierra Nevada, California





**UPPER SARDINE LAKE**

Northern Sierra Nevada, California



**CABIN RUIN & ROUND TOP**

**Charity Valley**

Northern Sierra Nevada, California